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Daniel Glickstein

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Reconsidering *Why We Lost*

Daniel Glickstein

Adding to the Special Commentary in the Winter 2014-15 issue of *Parameters* (vol. 44, no. 4), Daniel Glickstein gives Daniel Bolger's *Why We Lost* an "Incomplete" grade.

Why We Lost offers an inside account of the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts by retired Lieutenant General Daniel Bolger. It cites hyper-realistic descriptions of tactical firefights and conducts a broad, strategic discourse on the major policy goals of those wars. Chapters of the book characterize many of the prominent military and civilian personalities involved, but I hew here to General Bolger's strategic commentary and would like to single out three key points for further scrutiny:

- the lack of a cohesive enemy in both Iraq and Afghanistan;
- how deeply the oscillation of American support and the broadcasted deadline for an American presence impacted the readiness of the Afghan Security Forces (ANSF), and the strategic calculus of our enemies; and, lastly,
- the importance of "buy-in" from local civilians and the cooperation of local security forces in forging an enduring stability.

Know Thyself, Know Thy Enemy

The most vexing problem for tactical forces in Iraq and Afghanistan was identifying the enemy. As General Bolger noted, our technology and training "sent every American platoon of soldiers into action confident that they could slay their antagonists with impunity today, tonight, and as long as it took...as long as the Americans could find the enemy. As usual, therein lay the rub." (426) With the exception of periodic Special Operations Forces raids and larger conventional operations (valley sweeps with blocking positions, etc.), the average day consisted of clearing routes of improvised explosive devices and meeting with local national leaders, including periodic interruptions of indirect-fire attacks and ineffective hit-and-run ambushes. Usually, coalition forces could expect to escape unscathed, and in some instances even "pick off" a few of the slower antagonists. But "a gaggle of one-sided firefights...do not victory make, especially against guerilla enemies." (428)

Additionally, there was a failure to acknowledge the diversity of antagonists in each theater. Al Qaeda and the Taliban took center stage and presented the strongest threat to American soldiers. But organized groups such as the Haqqani Network and Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin,

Daniel Glickstein served in Afghanistan's Laghman Province as a US Army National Guard soldier in 2011-2012.

Muqtada Al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi militia, and non-affiliated local nationals interspersed into the Afghan and Iraqi mix as well. General Bolger states "we were drawn into nasty local feuds, we took on too many diverse foes, sometimes confusing supporters with opponents and vice versa." (429-430) The counterinsurgency canon that came to the forefront by 2006 posited that providing services to the population and protecting them against the insurgents would win greater popular support and weaken the enemy. But troops already stretched too thinly could not guarantee 24/7 protection for civilians across each theater, and all the afore-mentioned foes had ample opportunity to threaten, coerce, or cajole varying levels of support. And appeals and strategies that might work to counter the Taliban proved completely ineffective against the violence of a farmer angry at events such as Robert Bales' murder of Afghan civilians in 2012.

Short-term Commitment

Another major point raised by General Bolger is the irreparable damage stemming from the media-shaped erosion of long-term US commitment. By the late 2000's, the American public's tolerance for extended, bloody campaigns abroad as fading fast, and many politicians were echoing this sentiment. The antagonists in Iraq and Afghanistan, no strangers to using the internet and social media to study the enemy, were well aware of this shift in domestic US politics. Predictably, the insurgents were willing to bide their time, avoid risky and decisive engagements, and wait for the international coalition and American forces to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan. The Coalition, and not the insurgents, fell into a sustainability trap.

Unfortunately, the fleeting commitment to Iraq and Afghanistan negatively impacted US service-members, too. While General Bolger's suggestion of a correlation between drug abuse and disciplinary issues amongst soldiers and the eroding US commitment may be exaggerated, his overall claim the "president thoughtfully and deliberately condemned Americans in uniform to years of deadly, pointless counterinsurgency patrols sure to end in a wholesale pullout" rings true. (374) Faced with deficient local security forces, the likely prospect of ambushes and improvised explosive device strikes with no real enemy in sight, and the inevitable conclusion the war would be over in another year or two, the strain from 2011 onwards was quite substantial for US service-members.

All Security is Local

The last critical point, and most vexing problem, is the matter of local support and security. Consider the notable successes of the past decade: Colonel McMaster's stabilization of Tal Afar, Captain Travis Patriquin's unconventional methods leading to the origins of the "Sunni Awakening" in Iraq, and the fruitful albeit short-lived deployment of Afghan Local Police. Although each case is unique and characterized by different methods, local buy-in and support were critical to each. A foreign military force can only affect so much change in a given country, and each decision casts second- and third-order effects of unknown magnitude. (David Kilcullen once offered the interesting analogy of considering what would happen if an Iraqi security force tried to come in and establish order in New York City.) Local national forces appear

to constitute the only option with the ability to attain legitimacy, used along with the background knowledge needed to root out antagonists at the tactical level.

Regrettably, the lingering question is how to find, train, and empower these local forces to reach a suitable level of performance. Finding young men and women with tactical prowess is difficult, and made worse by trying to determine whether or not they are sympathetic to enemy combatants. In addition, the sectarian divisions in Iraq and the influence of criminals and war lords in Afghanistan also block this effort. There is a fine line between developing local security and training and abetting local militias (Shia death squads in 2006-2007 Iraq, for example), and this nuanced problem deserves further attention.

Conclusion

General Bolger's blunt talk in certain chapters must be taken in stride, and should not detract from his depiction of the past decade of conflict. His statement that the American military is more suited to decisive, conventional strikes such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq is absolutely correct. But this fact should not be pushed to an extreme where we abandon counterinsurgency yet again, and pray for better, more conventional future conflicts. Instead, General Bolger's work should spark further debate on the factors contributing to the effectiveness of counterinsurgency but still require study.

For me, the most critical issue was the process of choosing and training a local military and police force. Other soft skills such as interacting with local politicians and religious figures and partnering with contractors and civil-military teams to establish public works and facilities are indeed difficult, but the military made significant progress in these areas over time. However, the security-force training process was too often plagued by "stop-go" changes, insider attacks, corruption, desertion, and sectarian divisions. This is the area needing further illumination. Train-and-equip programs remain preeminently a domain of the US Department of Defense and US Armed Forces. Given General Bolger's critical positions as an advisor to the Iraqi Army and later as the commanding general of NATO's training mission in Afghanistan, I had hoped to hear more about these problems, which arguably may determine more than any other whether the US can meet minimal and sustainable strategic objectives in any conflict-affected countries determined to be in the US national interest. Despite this shortcoming, *Why We Lost* lays the groundwork for analysts, civilian and military, to reexamine strategic tasks, derive lessons, and exhibit the moral courage to tell policy-makers their ends require far more time (and other resources) than their terms of office can provide.

